

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

**DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln**

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Fall 2011

## Review of *Bad Land Pastoralism in Great Plains Fiction* by Matthew J. C. Cella

Becky Faber

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Faber, Becky, "Review of *Bad Land Pastoralism in Great Plains Fiction* by Matthew J. C. Cella" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2725.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2725>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Bad Land Pastoralism in Great Plains Fiction.* By Matthew J. C. Cella. Foreword by Wayne Franklin. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010. xiii + 230 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

Matthew Cella's *Bad Land Pastoralism in Great Plains Fiction* is based on the concept of "the dialogue between human culture and nonhuman nature on the Great Plains" as explored through the region's literature. Cella defines "bad land pastoralism" as "a persistent effort to both confront and transcend the losses accrued during the ongoing attempt to permanently inhabit a bioregion defined by motion and transience." The reader, to follow Cella's argument, must consider and reconsider the stereotypes of the Great Plains, particularly as they apply to how the region was populated and what the concept of land can mean to Plains residents.

Cella's approach is to pair texts that reflect similar themes relating to culture and environment. The book has five sections: "(Un) settling the Indian Wilderness"; "Pastoralism and Enclosure"; "Harmonious Fields and Wild Prairies"; "Patches of Green and Fields of Dust"; and "Healing the Wounds of History." His choices of texts for each section are, respectively, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* with James Welch's *Fools Crow*; Winnifred Eaton's *Cattle* with Conrad Richter's *Sea of Grass*; Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* with *A Lost Lady*; Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* with Frederick Manfred's *The Golden Bowl*; and Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* with Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*.

The textual pairings are well thought out and solidly support Cella's ideas of "motion and transience" in the Plains. This range of works captures a breadth of time frames and attitudes toward the land, from Cooper's early pioneers seeking their own form of Eden on the prairie to what Cella cites as King's characters, who "suffer from the postmodern condition of placelessness." They provide interesting models for those who teach American or Great Plains literature. Cella is thorough in explicating how

the paired texts work together. This approach of explanations and interpretations is not one to be quickly read. The reader will need time after each section to absorb the manner in which Cella ties texts together before continuing with the next section. For some readers, this book may be most helpful in only one or two sections as a useful supplement to teaching specific Plains texts or units. I recommend reading the entire book first to see the larger picture Cella develops.

BECKY FABER  
Career Services  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln